

“The Power of Love” based on Psalm 22 and Mark 16:1-8

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Easter, March 31, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, we celebrate! We celebrate the resurrection and the hope we have because of it. In truth, this is our task every Sunday or in any church service, even at every funeral. But on this day, the first Sunday after the first full moon of Spring, many of us break out the pastel colors, put on the special clothes, and we try to gather together with family or friends for a special meal.

This is a joyful time, and it has been my favorite holiday even as a kid. I used to want to give Easter gifts, which usually meant a baseball card. Easter coincided often with spring training and I'd buy the latest packs of Topps, Donruss, or Fleer, which I'd sort to find the favorite players of each of my family members and give them the card for that year.

No matter how you celebrate, typically this day is set apart as a special day. It is truly a holy day, in which we hope to lay aside our doubts. We try to lay aside our disagreements, and we try to lay aside our excuses. We hope that perhaps this year that those doubts will disappear. Maybe this is the year our disagreements will miraculously dissolve. Maybe this is the year we give up our excuses for why we give in to personal temptation, excuses for why we don't come to church, our excuses for why we don't pray nearly enough, our excuses for why we don't read the bible, our excuses for why we just stand by as structural sin in our culture continues to take lives.

Our prelude this morning was an adaptation of Psalm 22 to the experience of the disciples – their experience after hearing Jesus cry out its first line – My God, My God, why did you abandon me? Their experience of seeing his lifeless body taken from the cross and put in the tomb. He did so many miracles. He was supposed to be the Messiah. But on that Friday evening and Saturday, it was all lost. He was dead.

We can look back from our vantage point and say that they should have known better. After all, the gospels record Jesus saying many times that he would die and rise again. But how many times had they or even you seen a person die and come back to life? Sure, he raised that little girl, and he raised Lazarus, but if he's dead, who then will be the one to come and raise him?

Not the disciples. They were huddled up in that upper room – afraid. That was the purpose of the cross used by Rome. Sure, it killed, but more than all – it evoked fear. This was the ultimate in shame, to be hanged naked on a tree and slowly suffocated before all to see.

When Rome crucified rebels and slaves, it was meant to have a ripple effect, and it usually did. The followers would step aside, fearing the same fate. You see, death in battle in the ancient world and even today, is considered honorable. Public execution, especially in this manner, was shameful. Rome made effective use of the cross in silencing critics without regard to real evidence, just as they did with Jesus. They would hang individuals with a whiff of suspicion to ensure a death of shame, not honor.

Only the Lord God of Israel was their hope, but this was the charge the people hurled at Jesus, “He trusted in the Lord. Let the Lord deliver him. Let the Lord save him.” It might be easy for the disciples to wonder – Are you really there, God? Really? “O God, why did he trust in you? They doubted you – you proved them right. We have nowhere else to turn now. From our mother's womb, it was you. You are the one we were to trust.”

C.S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, wonderfully captures this in Susan & Lucy. They had lost all hope when they saw a humbled Aslan surrounded by bulls and beasts, and how the forces of evil cheered at their moment to destroy the once great lion before striking him dead with the stone knife.

In our everyday lives, I think we want to celebrate the resurrection, but then life happens. If sin and death are defeated, why is so much evil still running rampant in the world? We live in that Saturday moment that we tried to capture in our song. We live in the reality that even though we know the promises intellectually, even though we know where our trust is supposed to be placed, and even though we know that he is risen from the dead. Our belief, our faith, our trust, even our allegiance all falter at times. We wonder if we've been abandoned. We make our own cries, our own cries of dereliction.

Yet, the women in our gospel were not content to wallow in this grief and uncertainty. They knew their task and set out to do it. They were ill prepared for it. You see, at sundown on the Sabbath, they went and bought spices to dress and anoint Jesus's body the way it should have been, if Jesus had not been crucified so late on a Friday. I love the subtlety of how Mark calls out that all the men are hiding – "Who will roll away the stone for us?"

The women went alone – but they went. When they got there, they were amazed at the sight of the open tomb and a man sitting on the right in a white robe. It wasn't Jesus but he had a message: "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus the Nazarene, the one who had been crucified. He is risen! He is not here! Look at the place where they set him. Then go and say to his disciples and to Peter, that he goes before you into Galilee. At that place you will look upon him, just as he said to you."

The messenger calls out Peter, the one who on the night Jesus was betrayed said, "I would die with you Lord!" But now, he is hiding. In this way, the messenger calls each of us out this morning as well. Do we trust in God's promises? Or do we make promises that we cannot keep?

Beloved, the end of Psalm 22, which Ben read for us this morning, reveals to us that the words cried out from the cross were not a cry of dereliction, but of praise and of hope, for they point us to this Psalm predicting not just the suffering of the Messiah, but the hope of this moment because the Lord hears the cries, and that the ends of the world shall remember this moment. They will turn back to the Lord, they will repent, so that all the families of the nations will worship, not their false gods, but worship before the Lord, who rules over all the nations. This is the power of God's love.

My sisters and brothers, there is great evil in this world, and we all face challenges. I fear that well-meaning Christian language has made it harder to understand this. We mistake the moment of the cross as God punishing sin by killing Jesus, as if this was what God needed, and as if God and Jesus are separate. The early church used the term ransom, or redemption, and by the middle ages, when culture had changed, people worried about a transaction here. Does this mean God paid the Devil?

But the early church never saw ransom or redemption as a payment or a transaction, but they saw the reality that when evil tried to take the life of the eternal Son in Christ, what they thought that they could take, was given instead to us by faith. Jesus gave his life as a ransom, as he says in Mark's gospel, but the powers that tried to take it – the nations, Rome, the Sanhedrin, the Devil – were left emptyhanded and the gift of Christ's inheritance was given to us by faith, with a downpayment, in the Holy Spirit living in and among us, pouring God's love in our hearts.

Beloved, God so loved the world that he sent the only begotten – the truly unique – Son, so that all who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life. God sent the Son to reconcile all the world to himself, so he who knew no sin, became sin, so that we might reveal the justice of God. This is the never ending, endlessly merciful, covenantal love of God. The Son entered the world for the world, and the world rejected him.

This week in that Charlotte Observer, a colleague in Charlotte, Rev. Kate Murphy said, "God didn't crucify Jesus; humans did. God is not the crucifier, even indirectly. God is the crucified. Jesus' death exposes the lie that violence could ever be good, justified, or holy. Good Friday is good because it is the day that Jesus shows us there is another way, a way of absorbing and transforming violence without perpetuating it."

Her words echo the early church. We're going to go back 1700 years ago to Athanasius of Alexandria who gathered together the teachings of the early church to summarize our faith, enabling it to be preserved in the transition from illegal to favored in the empire.

The great Egyptian theologian in "On the Incarnation," said: "He, the Life of all, our Lord and Savior, did not arrange the manner of his own death, lest He should seem to be afraid of some other kind. No. He accepted and bore upon the cross a death inflicted by others, and those others His special enemies, a death which to them was supremely terrible and by no means to be faced; and He did this in order that, by destroying even this death, He might Himself be believed to be the Life, and the power of death be recognized as finally annulled."

"A marvelous and mighty paradox has thus occurred," he said. "for the death which they thought to inflict on Him as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument to death's defeat."

Beloved, the world continues to writhe and rebel against the power of God's love, trying to convince us that love is naïve, and that power, wealth, and popularity are the key to our true salvation – our happiness right here and right now. But the cross shows us that no matter what – self-giving love wins. It wins. It's not in the type of victory the world touts, but it is the true victory, defeating the powers that enslave us to more, and more.

That's the thing, sin is not a problem because it offends God, but because it enslaves us. God's rules are not the arbitrary thoughts of a fickle deity wanting us all to measure up. You are loved by God and sin separates you from God not by God's rejection or abandonment, but by our abandonment of God. God loves you. The incarnation – God becoming human in Jesus, along with his life of healing and inclusion, plus his death imposed by the world in its harshest terms all lead to his resurrection exposing sin and death as powerless against God's love.

When we give in to sin and death now, we give it a power over us that it does not deserve. This is what God mourns, because God is pursuing you in Christ by the Spirit, with arms wide open like on the cross to embrace you and pull you in and make you free. God does not like our personal sins because they damage us, demanding more, and more, and more, even to the point of death. Think of all the things we think we achieve, and then more is demanded by these. We need more money, more power, more comfort, more popularity. Nothing is enough. These powers are never satisfied.

Instead, God is. The God of life wants all of us to turn away from our sin and back toward God, who loves us as we are and desires us to grow day by day. This is not just personal piety, but a call to share in building the Kingdom of God. It is about being truly ready to act in this world. It may require suffering, but our job is to alleviate the suffering of others.

We are fortified for this by the love of God that the Holy Spirit pours in our hearts. It is built up by our participation in the church community, our prayers, and our reading of God's word. These things together help us to know the true power of love, which is made known in our Lord Jesus.

Yes, evil remains in this world, but you and I are loved by God and a part of God's solution, and we know that no matter what this world throws at us this love will prevail: Christ is risen and so will we! The life of Christ is abundant, and it is given now. It is given so that we can live without fear – because this life is also eternal. Hallelujah, today Christ is alive! He is risen. He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Amen.